

Grußbotschaft von Noam Chomsky

For good reasons, Mumia Abu-Jamal has become a symbol of a major scandal of American society, encapsulating its most salient features: a black man who spent many years on death row and remains imprisoned without having had anything like a fair trial.

When Mumia was sentenced to death 30 years ago, the rate of incarceration in the US was not out of the spectrum of comparable societies – towards the high end, but not truly extreme. Since then it has steadily increased, and is now 5 to 10 times as high as similar societies, in fact the highest in the world among countries with meaningful records. The targets have been primarily black males, like Mumia. The usual pretext is the “drug war” that was revived by President Nixon and became far more punitive under Ronald Reagan and his successors. The word “pretext” is appropriate. As was brought out clearly in the recent Western hemisphere conference in Colombia, the “drug war” has had no effect on drug use. In the Western hemisphere both the demand and the supply (guns) are overwhelmingly in the US, which is by now almost alone in demanding criminalization, while even quasi-governmental studies have long demonstrated that prevention and treatment are far more cost-effective. When policies are pursued that have no effect on the alleged problem, and the most effective methods are systematically avoided, simple rationality leads us to inquire into further motives, and to use as evidence predictable consequences. These are very clear. At home, the consequence has been selective incarceration of the “underclass,” those who have become superfluous as the economy was reoriented in the 1970s towards financialization and offshoring of production. Much more evidence points in the same direction, and there is more to say about the consequences abroad.

All of this relives some of the darkest days of American history. Slavery was ended with the Civil War, granting African-Americans formal freedom. After a decade, a North-South compact effectively authorized criminalization of black life, and a form of slavery of extreme brutality was reintroduced -- also, incidentally, providing a disciplined and controlled workforce for a large part of the American industrial revolution. The system pretty much lasted until World War II, when free labor was needed for war industry, continuing through the rapid growth period of the '50s and '60s. Then came the sharp economic changes, the imposition of a form of neoliberalism, and the re-criminalization of black life. For almost 500 years, since the first slaves were brought by the early colonists, African-Americans have had a few decades of a fair degree of freedom and opportunity.

While black men are the primary victims of the savage incarceration policies, they are by no means the only ones, including political prisoners – and Mumia can be considered one. Another prominent current case is Bradley Manning, who is accused of the “crime” – in fact, the public service – of leaking diplomatic cables so that citizens can know what their government is doing. He has been in prison for two years without trial, more than half of that time in solitary confinement, a form of torture that is all too common in the prison system. And he is not alone.

In a few years we will be commemorating the 900th anniversary of the Magna Carta, the foundation of modern civil liberties, which banned detention of a free man “except by the lawful judgment of his equals and according to the law of the land,” in a fair and speedy trial. There has been significant expansion of such rights in the modern period. The current trajectory is not a promising one. Mumia Abu-Jamal represents far more than just himself.